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Roundtable
Culture specific rules and second foreign language learning
--Across disciplines--
(Abstract)



It has long been recognized that much of linguistic behavior is governed by culture-specific rules as well as universal principles. Communicatively competent speakers of a particular language share not only the grammar of the language but also pragmatic rules--rules governing the use of the language within actual contexts of communication: They must know, for example, how to start or close conversations, which level of politeness/formality to employ, what manner of utterance--loudness, speed, hesitancy, etc.--to adopt, what rules of rhetoric and what speech act to use, what topics to introduce or avoid, what style to adopt in public or private discourse, and so forth; they must even share the same patterns of thinking. Confusion or misunderstanding often results when foreigners phrase their thoughts correctly but fail to follow the expected pragmatic rules.

This panel, consisting of researchers specializing in different fields, phonetics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and ESL, intends to provide an opportunity to discuss interesting questions concerning foreign language teaching that can be adequately explored only in a cross-disciplinary space of inquiry. Each panelist presents empirical data to show that English and Japanese speakers follow different linguistic-pragmatic rules specific to their respective cultures. They agree in essence that teachers of foreign language need to be sufficiently aware of such gaps in order to help students attain an adequate level of communicative competence.

The question that the panel as a group would like to address is provocative and it concerns the meaning of "communicative competence" as applied to the discussion of foreign language teaching. When we say that the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language is to attain the native speakers' level of communicative competence, do we exactly mean that the students are to learn to think and behave like native speakers? If the answer is negative, what is the adequate level of communicative competence for foreigners? How is it different from the native speakers' communicative competence?

Presentations

1. Opening (Introduction to the Session)Katsue Akiba Reynolds
2. "Phatic Aspect of Language: Channeling and back-channeling in Japanese"Katsue Akiba Reynolds

Reynolds presents evidence for Japanese being a "hyper-phatic" language from the data gathered during the past several years. She analyzes forms of what she calls "channeling", which occur quite regularly in Japanese but not so explicitly in other languages such as English and thus have so far been completely overlooked. She proposes a research framework for analyzing conversational data which includes "channeling" in addition to "backchanneling" as an important component.

3. Teaching Communicative Competence: The Case of Japanese Suprasegmentals"Yumiko Ohara

Ohara has found a culture-specific constraint that Japanese female speakers, not males, are subject to with regard to pitch. She discusses the problem as it relates to teaching Japanese to speakers of languages such as English, which do not have the gender gap to the same extent as Japanese.

4. "Some Observations on Communicative Behaviors in Japanese and English Conversational Interactions and the Implications for Language Teaching"Kumiko Murata

Murata highlights the ways in which the communicative behaviors such as interruption, overlapping and pause/silence are used at topic boundaries in Japanese and English interactions, paying attention also to the value differences incorporated in the use of these behaviors. Implications for language teaching will also be discussed.

5. "Discourse Politeness in Japanese Conversation: From the Results of Speech Level Shifts and Topic Management Strategies" Mayumi Usami

Usami analyzes Japanese dyadic conversations between strangers focussing on speech-level shifts and topic management strategies depending on the interlocutor's age and gender. She discusses the results from the viewpoint of culture-specific patterns of conversational interactions and how these results can be accounted by the concept of which she calls "discourse politeness".

6. Concluding RemarksKatsue Akiba Reynolds

Presentation 2. Reynolds

Phatic Aspect of Language Channeling and back-channeling in Japanese and English

(Abstract)

Many observers of the Japanese conversational interaction have pointed out that Japanese speakers backchannel (i.e., nod and/or give various expressions of approval corresponding to English expressions *Yes, Yeah, Hmmhuh*, etc.) far more frequently than the speakers of other languages such as English. One study (Maynard 1993), reports that back-channeling was twice as frequent in Japanese conversation as in English conversation. My data amply supports this observation. However, the communicative function of back-channeling has not been fully understood and the question why Japanese speakers backchannel more frequently remains unanswered.

This study makes a typological claim that Japanese is a highly phatic language, a language in which the “phatic” function of the six-functions of language (Roman Jakobson, 1960) is given relatively more importance. While engaged in conversation, both the speaker and the hearer are compelled to check whether or not the channel works: The speaker keeps sending the message asking the hearer to keep listening and the hearer keeps responding to the speaker’s concern. There is a need, therefore, for studying both ways of the phatic communication, “channeling” and “back-channeling”, if we are to come to grips with this salient characteristic of Japanese. The most typical friendly face-to-face conversation in Japanese would easily become the “phatic communion” (Malinowski (1953), the speaker and the hearer show each other their intention to establish and maintain the binding/channel between them while communicating their thoughts.

The *dusu-ne* in the following sample, for example, stands in no grammatical relation to other elements of the clause or the sentence, but it occurs very frequently in semi-spontaneous public discourse such as TV live reporting, TV satellite interviewing and teaching in a large high school class.

Daijin -**desu-ne**, nichiibei-shunōkaidann -de-wa -**desu-ne**,
[Mr. (Finance)Minister] [in the Japan-US top meeting]

nichibei bōei kyōryoku -no iwayuru gaidorain -o minaosi-te -**desu ne**, ...
[to review so-called guidelines for Japan-US security cooperation and]

‘Mr. Minister. In the Japan-US summit meeting [the decision was made] to reexamine the so-called guidelines of the Japan-US security cooperation and [to continue to study the japan-US security cooperation with respect to possible contingencies in the area surrounding Japan.]

In this brief interview (5.5 minutes) of the Finance Minister of Japan by a NHK newscaster and a staff (in the 7 a.m. "Good Morning Japan" show on the 18th of April this year), *desu-ne* occurs 38 times. Strangely, *desu-ne* (or its plain version *ne*) such as in this sample has been completely overlooked even though it occurs with so much frequency in various types of public discourse.

The *desu-ne* can be said to be comparable to "you know" in English. The culture value attached to it however is completely different: phatic behavior is considered to be part of the communicative competence that is expected of an educated native speaker of Japanese while a frequent use of "you know" by an English-speaking state official of high rank in an TV interview would certainly give an impression of uncertainty. The best way to capture the nature of *desu-ne* in this context is to say that this is a phatic expression on the part of the speaker. The Minister is simply expressing his intention to establish personal binding with the audience, which does not actually have access to the conversational channel. In a face-to-face conversation, the Minister does not have to channel as frequently because the hearer cooperates with him by back-channeling.

With this characteristic of Japanese in mind one can discuss some issues related to foreign language learning more adequately. Students returning from their stay in Japan sometimes acquire the phatic behavior and begin to backchannel more frequently than they are supposed to while speaking in English, annoying their American relatives and friends. Comparative studies of the phatic aspects of Japanese and languages which are not as phatic as Japanese will shed some new light on the cross-cultural communication problems. It also raises an interesting question as to the meaning of communicative competence in foreign language teaching. Should the foreign students of Japanese be expected to attain that level of communicative competence encompassing channeling and back-channeling? Some native Japanese language teachers assert that foreign students should not be expected to think/ behave exactly like Japanese.

References:

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Maynard, K. Senko. 1993. *Kaiwa Bunseki [Conversational Analysis]*. Tokyo: back-channelingKuroshio Shuppan.